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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000233

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO/PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 LOOKING STRONGER; OPTIMISTIC  
ABOUT ELECTIONS

REF: A. BEIRUT 197  
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 190  
[1](#)C. BEIRUT 186  
[1](#)D. BEIRUT 141  
[1](#)E. BEIRUT 140

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Following the very successful February 14 rally commemorating former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination, March 14 leaders have expressed confidence about March 14's prospects for winning the June 7, 2009 parliamentary elections. The widely attended February 14 rally, a major success, seems to have provided the coalition with a much-needed push forward. In fact, March 14 leaders Saad Hariri, Samir Geagea, and Walid Jumblatt have highlighted positive momentum from the February 14 rally to us in recent days.

[1](#)2. (C) Despite the positive rush, internal March 14 bickering over electoral list formation continues. Also, March 14 contacts have raised concerns about recent incidents of violence, warning that Syrian or Iranian-instigated violence in the run-up to elections is a real possibility. Many believe these incidents, as well as the opposition's recent maneuverings on electoral issues, are indications that the opposition is becoming increasingly nervous about its electoral prospects following the highly successful February 14 event. End summary.

POSITIVE OUTLOOK  
FOR ELECTIONS

[1](#)3. (C) In recent weeks, March 14 leaders have expressed confidence on the coalition's prospects for winning 2009 parliamentary elections. March 14 parliamentary Majority leader Saad Hariri told us February 18 that he was confident his coalition would win the June parliamentary elections and that these elections were the "only way" to halt Iranian influence in Lebanon (Ref A). Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea and Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) head Walid Jumblatt -- fellow leaders in the March 14 Coalition -- agreed in separate February 22 meetings with HFAC

Professional Staff Member Alan Makovsky and Ambassador that the popular mood for March 14 was good. Massive turnout for the February 14 commemoration of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri bolstered March 14 leaders and has left them feeling confident on the coalition's electoral prospects. (Note: Press reports estimated rally attendance in the hundreds of thousands, and representatives from all sects, not just Sunni, attended to pay respect to the slain leader. The gathering was the largest since the initial February 2005 event. End note.)

14. (C) PM Siniora and MP Saad Hariri told us separately that the massive turnout for the February 14 commemoration proved popular sentiment was behind the coalition. The rally seems to have energized March 14 members in the run-up to parliamentary elections. In fact, we have heard little disgruntlement lately from Hariri's March 14 allies that Hariri is slacking on his electoral responsibilities (although he has been away from Beirut, in Riyadh, for the past several days).

BUT TASKS REMAIN  
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15. (C) While optimistic, March 14 leaders still acknowledge a tough race ahead. Geagea assessed that March 14 and the March 8 opposition were "neck and neck" for 2009 elections. He also admitted that the coalition was experiencing difficulty in forming its candidate lists. Similarly, Jumblatt -- citing electoral list formation -- stressed that coalition members needed to avoid arguing over "trivial

BEIRUT 00000233 002 OF 004

things." Jumblatt expected lists would be finalized by the coalition's convention.

16. (C) Moving to other aspects of elections, Jumblatt emphasized the importance of the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation television station (LBC). He told the Ambassador that Saudi Arabia had invited LBC owner Pierre Daher to the Kingdom but had failed to convince Daher to reach a settlement with Geagea over ownership rights (Ref B). Jumblatt commented that March 14 leader Saad Hariri hoped to buy Saudi Prince Walid bin Talal's share of LBC. Jumblatt assessed Armenian Tashnaq would stay with the opposition for 2009 elections.

17. (C) Differences of opinion still exist within the coalition on what to do post-elections if March 14 wins. On the formation of a national unity government after elections, Geagea admitted the two most prominent Shia members of March 14 did not adequately represent the Shia sect; Lebanese Shia were unlikely to accept a March 14 government without Shia ministers from the more-representative opposition Amal or Hizballah. Jumblatt agreed that a March 14 majority government could not survive with "token Shia." Although Jumblatt opposed March 14 participation in the cabinet in the case of a March 8 electoral victory, he speculated that Saudi Arabia would push Hariri to accept the premiership in a compromise government. (Note: For his part, Hariri has said publicly he would not form a national unity government if March 14 won elections; he has also said he would refuse to serve as prime minister in an opposition-majority government. End note.)

18. (C) In recent public statements, Hizballah has said it would grant March 14 a blocking minority in any opposition-dominated government, in what March 14 contacts view as an opposition effort to secure its own blocking third, should March 14 prevail. Hizballah SYG Nasrallah in his February 15 speech emphasized the need for representatives of both sides and all parties to participate in the next government.

INCREASINGLY TENSE POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE  
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¶9. (C) Many contacts have noted that over the past month tensions among confessional groups in Lebanon had increased. In a possible indication that the opposition has taken note of March 14 momentum following the February 14 rally, opposition parties seems to be taking advantage of the high tension to make electoral gains. Jumblatt and Geagea highlighted that the spirit of the Doha Accord -- during which March 14 and March 8 participants pledged to refrain from personal attacks -- had disappeared.

¶10. (C) The recent dispute in the cabinet over the Council for the South (Ref E) debate on eavesdropping (Ref D) provide examples of the new, negative, atmosphere. Parliament Speaker Berri and Prime Minister have both dug in their heels on the issue, and neither is likely to back down. Particularly Berri, who has framed the argument as his fight to gain funding to rebuild homes in his native south Lebanon, will lose electoral points by accepting diminished funds for his Council. To defend himself, Berri is seeking to throw the blame on Siniora. Siniora's possible parliamentary candidacy in Sidon indicates that poisoned relations between the two will continue.

¶11. (C) Tension had been particularly noticeable in parliament, Geagea said. When a Shia MP speaks in parliament, the Sunni MPs prepare an attack without listening to the merits of the argument. Christian and Druze MPs, on the other hand, have "room to reason" and are not attacked solely because they represent a different religion, Geagea said. Jumblatt, who earlier in the day had visited families in the Metn, described the atmosphere there as "okay" but noted that "if things continue as they are, it will not be good."

¶12. (C) Geagea assessed that Syria and Iran were behind the  
BEIRUT 00000233 003 OF 004

recent souring of relations among Lebanese leaders. He accused Aoun of fomenting Christian fears of Sunni extremism, and generalizing the fear to the Sunni sect as a whole, in an attempt to sway Christian votes away from March 14. According to Jumblatt, Hizballah SYG Nasrallah's public declaration February 15 that Hizballah had acquired anti-aircraft rockets was a bad sign. Jumblatt argued that Nasrallah was declaring Hizballah's willingness to start another war. In the mind of the average Lebanese voter, such claims probably reinforce the image of Hizballah as the protector of Lebanon, a vital presence that should not be pushed aside.

SENSING SOMETHING BREWING  
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¶13. (C) Geagea noted that recent security incidents -- including rocket attacks against Israel February 21, hand grenades found at two LF headquarters, and clashes after the February 14 Hariri commemoration -- added to the country's instability. "There's something moving," Geagea said; "a political decision" had been made "somewhere," Iran or Syria, he speculated, to "heat things up" in Lebanon. Jumblatt praised the LAF G-2 for its work in apprehending suspects following February 14 violence, but noted that the current tension was unsustainable. Geagea cited threat information received from the LAF G-2 to speculate that Geagea would be a prime target for a Syrian assassination attempt.

¶14. (C) Many contacts have expressed concern that Syria would use violence to delay Lebanese elections if Damascus realized its allies were heading toward defeat. While neither Hizballah nor the Sunnis want a confrontation, the opposition may well play on fears of violence to summon up support for a Doha-style pre-negotiated electoral outcome (i.e., a 60-60 split in parliament for the opposition and majority, with the remaining 8 seats going to the President's candidates). Through this lens, Aoun's proposal earlier this month to hold

elections over two days could have been an attempt to open the door for delayed elections. If Aoun and his allies were losing after the first day at the polls, Geagea warned the second would never occur.

¶15. (C) Geagea and Jumblatt both supported U.S. engagement with Syria, but cautioned the U.S. administration on Syrian tactics. Geagea opined that Damascus was "keen on cheating," and both Jumblatt and Geagea cited demarcation of Sheba'a as an example of Syrian trickery. Although Syrian President Asad might tell the U.S. that he would take steps to demarcate the border with Lebanon, Geagea assessed Asad would start demarcation at the northern border. He would refuse to move on the demarcation of Sheba'a, the key issue border issue for both countries.

¶16. (C) Geagea noted that engagement should not occur only for the sake of engagement, but should focus on key issue and hold out real expectations for behavior change by the Syrian regime. Jumblatt opined that recent visits by U.S. delegations to Damascus had inspired confidence in Asad. Jumblatt said. Geagea suggested linking the appointment of a U.S. ambassador to Syria with successful completion of Lebanese parliamentary elections. The Syrian would be less likely to interfere in Lebanon's domestic politics, Geagea opined, if they had something to lose on their end.

¶17. (C) In a separate meeting on February 23, Hariri advisor Ghattas Khoury agreed that engagement in and of itself was not harmful, but warned that Syria would use renewed dialogue to its advantage to promote the perception that relations were warming between the two countries. In a February 23 meeting with March 14 Secretary General Fares Suaid, Suaid urged the U.S. to continue to stress its commitment to Lebanon's independence and sovereignty, as well as the need to hold elections on June 7, to offset any impact engagement might have on Syria's relations with Lebanon. Warning that the "killing machine" could start again if the opposition appeared to be losing the elections, Suaid said the U.S. message also should stress the need for elections to be held free from intimidation and fear.

BEIRUT 00000233 004 OF 004

COMMENT  
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¶18. (C) The U.S. should continue to do all in its power to bolster the spirits of Lebanon's moderates. March 14 and other moderate forces will view U.S. support for Lebanon -- moral, economic, and security -- as reassuring evidence that Lebanon's interests are not being sacrificed to regional developments. Meanwhile, the sporadic violence already observed highlights the risks of Iranian and Syrian interference in Lebanon's political process. End comment.

SISON